

Checking River Water Levels

When you make your plans for boating on the Upper Potomac River, a check of the water levels is extremely important for your safety. The National Weather Service may be contacted at 703-260-0305 or on the web to obtain the river water levels. Using the map at the right, compare the reported levels that apply to your planned route with the chart below.

Potomac River Water Levels			
Gauge Location	Normal	Caution	Danger
Paw Paw	3.0	5.0	11.0
Hancock	2.5	3.5	7.5
Shepherdstown	1.7	2.7	5.8
Point of Rocks	0.7	2.0	5.5
Little Falls	2.9	3.5	4.5

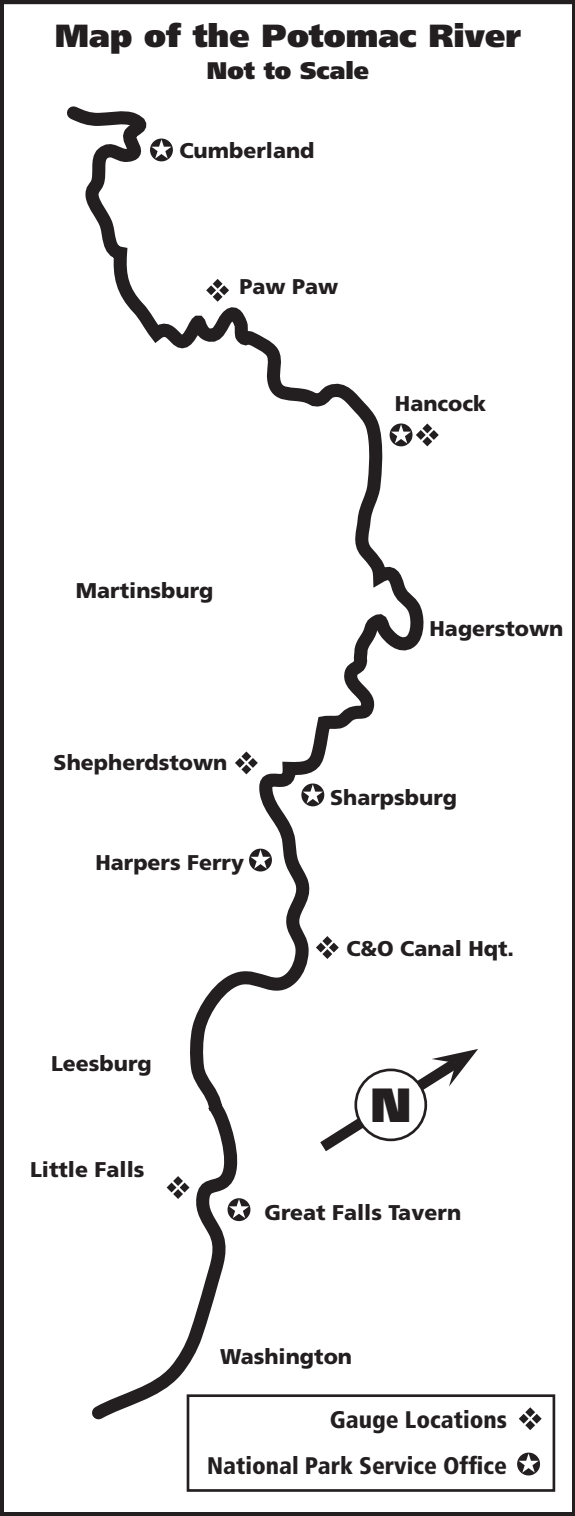
This information is provided as a guide and does not guarantee that any particular rapid or area of the river will not be hazardous at any level.

The chart above indicates the lowest depth (in feet) of the river stages. For example, normal depth at Paw Paw is 3.0 to 4.9 feet. The CAUTION level at Paw Paw is 5.0 to 10.9 feet. The DANGER level at Paw Paw is 11.0 feet and higher.

If the readings indicate CAUTION, you will encounter fast moving water and changes in the currents. If you are not experienced at boating during these conditions, you should consider delaying your trip until the water levels are below the CAUTION stage.

If the readings indicate DANGER, the conditions are extremely hazardous and boating during these conditions will endanger your life. You should consider delaying your trip until the water levels are below the CAUTION stage.

This warning does not apply to professionally guided trips or teams of expert white water paddlers.



Hazardous River Conditions Information & Advisories

Boaters should also look for river level indicators at selected launching ramps. Colored striping has been painted on the ramps to indicate the river level. The yellow stripe indicates the river to be at the CAUTION level. The red stripe indicates the DANGER level.

Local media are notified when river levels become hazardous. Please use this information when planning a trip on the Upper Potomac River.

The areas immediately below dams on the Upper Potomac River are dangerous. The water flow below the dam will draw a boat or person toward the dam. This will cause a boat or person to be pulled into the dam and under the surface of the water - even if the boat is under power or the person is wearing a life jacket. Avoid the area below dams at ALL times.

Even under normal river flow, the river is still very treacherous if you are careless or unprepared. Just because the river has a normal flow, does not mean that it is safe. Ignoring basic safety rules can get you in serious trouble.



Boating on the Upper Potomac River

Boating or canoeing on the Upper Potomac River can be a rewarding experience and a lot of fun. Many areas of the river, however, should only be attempted by boaters and canoeists with extensive experience, or with a certified white water instructor. For your safety, boating and canoeing are not recommended in these areas:

Dam # 3 to US 340 bridge.
Class III rapids (hazardous)

Little Falls to Chain Bridge
Class V rapids (significant hazard to life)

Great Falls area
Class VI rapids (extreme risk to life)

Boating and canoeing in these areas is extremely dangerous and should not be attempted when water levels are above normal.

Fishing and Wading in the Upper Potomac River

Wading or swimming should not be attempted when the river level is at the caution or danger level or when the Potomac River Advisory is in effect. Slippery footing plus the increased velocity of the current can easily cause a life threatening situation. Strong currents exist in the Upper Potomac River that can drag you under. Wading in the waters around Great Falls is prohibited.

At ANY river level Personal Flotation Devices (Life Jackets) are recommended while on, in, or near the water. Drownings have occurred when people walking on rocks slipped and fell into the water. Wading in the river without a life jacket is dangerous. Fishermen should be aware that chest waders can fill with water and pull them under. Chest waders should be tied snugly around the chest to help prevent this. Again, a life jacket should be worn. There are several designs that allow free movement of the arms.

Safe Anchoring

Never anchor a vessel only from the stern in swift or moving water. Boats anchored from the stern can easily fill with water due to river currents. Always anchor your boat from the bow. If anchoring from the bow and stern, never anchor the boat with the side facing the current. When using a two anchor method, always anchor the bow first and ensure the bow anchor has a good hold before setting the stern anchor. Should the bow anchor fail, pull-up or cut the stern anchor immediately to avoid the vessel from being pulled under and filling with water.

Regulatory Markers

The boat launching areas and the main portion of the river are clearly marked with buoys and signs according to the Uniform State Waterway Marking System. Buoys similar to the one below are placed at key locations on the river to indicate the maximum speed allowed on that portion of the river. In addition to speed limit buoys, you will find buoys indicating minimum wake areas, and warning buoys indicating the location of dams. Never go past a dam warning buoy.



Safety Equipment Requirements

In addition to the standard United States Coast Guard (USCG) equipment requirements, other safety equipment standards are in effect on the Upper Potomac River.

All children under the age of 7 must **WEAR** a United States Coast Guard approved Personal Flotation Device (life jacket- Type I, II, III or V) while underway on a recreational vessel under 21 feet in length in Maryland waters. The life jacket must be the proper size for the child and be in good and serviceable condition. The requirement does not apply when a vessel is moored or anchored or a child is below deck or in an enclosed cabin.

As of October 1, 2004, a child under the age of 4 must wear a PFD which features additional safety precautions, as appropriate for an infant, toddler, or young child, so as to:

- hold the child securely within the PFD, including a strap that is secured between the child’s legs to fasten together the front and back of the PFD.
- Maintain the buoyancy of the child, including an inflatable headrest or high collar; or
- Ensure the ready accessibility of the child from the water, including a web handle.

A person aboard a vessel, (including rafts and tubes) on a white water portion of a designated stream segment, **shall at all times wear** a USCG approved Type III or V PFD (life jacket) while on those stream segments. For kayaks and covered canoes, a safety helmet is required. Look for signs stream side, designating these areas.

A person aboard a vessel, raft or tube **shall wear** a USCG approved Type I, II, III or V personal flotation device (PFD) at all times while underway on the Upper Potomac River and its tributaries from November 15 through May 15 of the following year.

Restrictions Upstream of Dams

A boat may not be operated within an area 200 yards upstream of any dam on the Upper Potomac River with the exception of Dam #1, where the distance restriction is 100 yards.

Water Skiing Regulations

The following water skiing regulations are consistent with water skiing regulations throughout the State:

The operator of the towing vessel must be at least 12 years of age. In addition to the operator, an observer, at least 12 years of age, must also be on board the towing

vessel. Waterskiing and towing of inner tubes or other towed devices is prohibited between sunset and sunrise.

The skier, or person being towed on a towable device, must wear a U.S. Coast Guard approved personal flotation device

Boats must stay 100 feet or more from the shore, another boat , object, skier, swimmer or fixed object in the water.

Tow lines are restricted to a maximum of 75 feet, however, there is an exception for barefoot skiing, where the tow line may be 100 feet long. A skier may begin skiing from the shore, boat dock, or pier.

On the slackwater areas above Dams III, IV, and V, vessels that are towing inner tubes or other towed devices, where the tow line is attached directly to the device being towed, may tow no more than two (2) devices at any given time. This does not apply to water skiing, knee boards, or other controllable devices.

Weekend and Holiday Speed Limits

A 35 knot (41 miles per hour) speed limit is in effect on the slackwater areas behind Dams #3, #4, and #5 Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays all year. There is no speed limit in these areas Monday through Fridays, except at designated areas such as boat launching ramps.

The boat launching ramps and the main portion of the river are clearly marked with buoys and signs according to the Uniform State Waterway Marking System. Buoys are placed at key locations on the river to indicate speed restrictions and other regulatory information on the river.

Minimum Wake Zones at Public Launching Ramps

Minimum wake zones exist around all Maryland public boat launching ramps on the slackwater areas. These minimum wake zones encompass an area 200 yards upstream and 100 yards downstream, extending across the river to the opposite shore.

A minimum wake zone means that a boat operator may not operate or give permission to operate a vessel in excess of the slowest possible speed necessary to maintain steerage under prevailing wind and sea or river conditions. Steerage is defined as the minimum rate of speed necessary for the steering mechanism of a boat to be effective.

Personal Watercraft

Maryland has specific regulations for Personal Watercraft operation. A brochure is available from the Natural Resources Police that explain the regulations.



Robert L. Ehrlich, Jr., Governor
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C. Ronald Franks, Secretary



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Safety on the upper Potomac River



Safety Education Division

